

Chapter 12: Growing Up Faust in El Paso

Stories from Helen to me via my cheesy memory (mainly Swiss) plus some retorts from brother Jerry interpreting possible hyperbole inherited from their mother:

Re: overall theme of El Paso:

Jerry, Helen said that you felt you were mean to Helen, but she didn't remember it that way, she idolized you. She recalled how you would put her on the handlebars of your bike and peddle her out to the road near the (El Paso? Military?) airport, to watch the planes take off and land.

Jerry recalls: As I look back I don't now think I was always mean to her, only sometimes. I can't say I remember peddling her out to the airport (El Paso Municipal Airport as it was known then, now designated KELP - funny coincidence) but I remember spending many hours out there watching the airplanes come and go.

As time went on I got bolder and I went farther out, climbed through a barbwire fence weaving my way through the high sand dunes with embedded creosote bushes and hid just beyond the approach end of a runway to get a good closeup look at the airliners landing over my head. The start of the runway was maybe 30 or 40 yards beyond the fence I hid behind.

I learned an interesting atmospheric/aerodynamic phenomenon. Only on days when there was no cross wind about 30 seconds to a full minute later you could hear a loud windy swirling noise. Now that I am all smart about that stuff I know it was the intersection of the spreading trailing wingtip vortices. (Possibly too much nerdy information)

I was humiliated and severely chastised by two men who came roaring up out of nowhere in a station wagon telling me how dangerous it was out there and running me off. When I saw them approaching (too late) I got up, no longer trying to hide and started nonchalantly walking toward the fence that I had previously climbed over. However it didn't save me from getting bawled out.

Theme of being poor but happy in El Paso:

Your dog named KEPO for the radio station where your mom was writing copy for a living.

Jerry says: Kepo was a great dog. He was a black cocker spaniel mix and was a great companion.

(on being poor) Your mother always ensured that you kids had food on the table, but it was simple fare. Helen would tell me she was 11 years old before she realized *other* people put meat in their tacos.

Jerry recalls: I never thought of us as poor. To be sure there were richer people in the neighborhood but I would say we were average in that department. I don't believe that part about no meat in the tacos. Someone was embellishing a tad.

I know I never had any meatless tacos at home.

Movies:

The cut-off between child and adult fares for the local movie theater was "under 12"; Helen had reached her full height, and remembered being humiliated by the ticket seller: "Well! You're a **mighty big girl** for 11, aren't you?"

Jerry: I don't remember that occasion. I do remember catching the city bus with Helen when she was nine years old, headed for the movies at the Plaza Theater and the bus driver voicing his skepticism about her age since she was big for her age. Helen would tell the story of going to the movies on Saturday morning with a dime; the double-feature was 9 cents, leaving her a penny for candy at the counter. The double-feature always included some cliff-hanger, where the (Western?) hero was in a situation from which there was no escape ... until next Saturday.

Jerry: On Saturdays there was always a serial. I remember Tom Mix and especially Sky King. I loved Sky King. And you're right. Each episode always ended with a sure disaster, only to have been agilely sidestepped next week.

Another humiliation was at school, where an (art?) teacher looked at Helen's drawings/charcoal sketches, and (in essence) accused her of copying them, rather than drawing them freehand.

Jerry: Either I didn't know or remember that but I can certainly believe it.

Stories of your father's sense of humor, which I barely experienced.

Not only his sense of humor but his artistic talent: Having developed a reputation for growing a great variety of great flowers in the garden (mostly Eva's doing) dad made up a small poster as follows: Faust's flouricultural farms, flaunting flamboyant fragrance furnishes fancy flowers for fully-fed fees. His poster had fancy hand-drawn flora around the sides, top and bottom.

Helen would tell of a visitor asking him to pass the butter - he would hold it toward them, and then as they reached for it, he would jam the soft butter onto their outstretched thumb.

Jerry: I was never aware of that and I'm inclined to disbelieve it.

Your father's friend losing (his hand? fingers?) at an accident with fireworks on some community occasion, e.g., Fourth of July - at the mine? Glenwood?

Two of his good friends came out worse for the wear. One, Porterfield was killed, the other, Bill Word lost his forearm in a public fireworks accident in Silver City. Both were members in good standing in the SWNMPBWARCA (the Southwestern New Mexico Piscatorial Bird-Watching and Robin-Calling Association). In previous years when these two men took part in the fireworks displays I remember Dad's ranting at them about how no one could pay him enough money to do that - this from his experience with the use of dynamite in the mines. Dad's credibility quietly soared with his SWNMPBWARCA buddies after that. In fact the accident spelled the end of the SWNMPBWARCA.

More on the Southwestern New Mexico Piscatorial Bird-Watching and Robin-Calling Association. This was the name of Dad's fishing club. There were five members - a very tight bunch. They got together for fishing expeditions irregularly. Word got around about the club and there were others who wanted to join the action. Because it was so exclusive they made it their practice to take only one nonmember per trip.

Their vehicle was an old ambulance that they drug out of retirement and hand-painted robin

egg blue. It was basically held together with scotch tape and it barely ran. It's transmission was a wreck. The only workable gears were first, fourth and reverse.

Helen would tell me the story of being hit by a car at age 5, and the impact almost tore her ear off, leaving it 'hanging by a thread.' I would look carefully at her ear, amazed that the almost lost appendage had healed so perfectly, no scars. Later, when re-told this story, Mama said, "Hanging by a thread? You had a couple of stitches!" Of course, the 'hanging by a thread' was the way Helen had heard her Mama tell the story most of her life -

Jerry: I believe every bit of that paragraph exactly as you related it.

... now I'm thinking "Mama stories" should be a theme as well ... maybe you don't want this one published, but for Helen the saddest one was when Barb went ... to El Paso? Tucson? ... to care for your Mom (after surgery? for what purpose?). Helen always felt that Mama's irascible nature, impossible to satisfy/please, was in some part to blame for the miscarriage that followed. Sorry, I do apologize, but as I think of these memories, that is one that is there.

I'm going to pass on that one.

Other vignettes:

JWF the terrorist.

I was driving up to the local huge high school where there was an ongoing blood drive. I drove around the building looking for clues of where to go in to donate blood. Around by a back side entrance I saw the Red Cross vehicle. I parked, walked to the door but found it to be locked. A custodian just happened to be nearby. When I told him why I was there, he let me in that door which he unlocked for me. I walked through the building to where the action was and sat down with one of the Red Cross crew and got started with my interview.

A short time later two big burley guys approached me and told me I had to leave. I don't remember the conversation in detail but basically the idea was that since I hadn't entered through the front door properly who knows? I might be there only for the purpose (and I remember his words) "of harming a teacher". After some negotiation they caucused and decided I could stay and donate blood provided I walked over to the other side of the large room and give the administrator my wallet as collateral. I guess the purpose of sequestering my wallet was to teach me to never again enter the high school through the back door.

At that point I was highly pissed off and huffed out of the place.

Heading out to the ranch.

For several weeks in the summer Ann, Helen and I would visit Dad in Hanover, NM. There would always be one or two trips out to the ranch for a few days to stay in Ma Keen's (Eva's mom) old ranch house. Those were always good times. Usually it took two vehicles to convoy us all - two parents, Ann, Helen, me, stepsister Judy and the tree musketeers, John, Billy and Joe. I think dad liked showing us all off. He made it a point to stop by random acquaintances on the way out. I remember once going by the Schmitt's house in Silver City. I just remember "Jackie" aka Harrison Schmitt just standing beside the road watching us parade on by.

Working and traveling with Barbara.

For several years Barbara and I worked together in the same small group at the Space Division of GE Valley Forge. Occasionally we had to travel together to some organization associated with our work. Some of the people we had visited thought it was novel that we could travel together on business and maybe envied us a little. Others were snarky about it. Albuquerque was a place we traveled to frequently. On those times we could hole up with Helen and Mike in our own private little bedroom they made up for us. On one occasion when discussing an impending trip to ABQ our Navy contract monitor seemed to have mixed feelings about sending us out on the trip. He knew about our staying with family when we were there TDY and that we liked it. He didn't like that we liked it. He was torn. After a little heated, a little irrational discussion I finally said, "Hey Bill, if you want us out there, send us. If you don't, don't." He sent us.

Mama's jingle writing.

When Mama was a single mother with three kids living on Altura Blvd. in El Paso she was always looking for a way to make a few extra bucks. She liked entering the national contests of the time sponsored by laundry soap manufacturers etc. of the sort, complete the following sentence in 25 words or less, "I like ----- because-----". She won several second prize awards and once, first place, the prize being a \$200 rotary ironing machine.

Dad's Packard

When WWII was about to start dad knew that it would be hard to get cars so he decided to get a really really good car that would see him through the war years. He bought a luxurious Packard. What a mistake. It was forever giving him trouble and breaking down. At the time Packard Motor Co. had a slogan, "Ask the man who owns one." For a while dad had a sign in the rear window saying, "Don't ask me".

The thought that occurs to me as I capture these clues for you (some of which I didn't remember until I started writing the ones I did) is a talk I went to at (Library) Genealogy Center a month ago. Louise Farmer Smith gave a talk on "Saving Family History" about her suggestions on how to write/capture your family history. During the talk someone asked a question on writing embarrassing stuff and she mentioned an essay she had written on "*Betraying Family*" - I tracked down her email address and wrote her later and asked for that essay. I provide it below.